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Income Security to End Poverty in Manitoba

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Introduction

The Federal Government and the Manitoba Government are in the process of reviewing and developing poverty reduction strategies. In October 2016, the Federal Government released a discussion paper to solicit views from other levels of government, and the public to develop a poverty reduction strategy. The Manitoba government is required by law under *The Poverty Reduction Strategy Act* to implement a long-term strategy to reduce poverty and report publicly on its progress in its annual budget. The Province missed a May 2017 deadline to provide a five-year review and poverty advocates are calling on the government to undertake broad public consultations to ensure strong community engagement and feedback in the review process. To date, the government has not released a plan for the review that is required by law (Make Poverty History Manitoba June 1, 2017).

Canada's and Manitoba's income assistance programs provide support to individuals and families when they have no other way to support themselves. There are 71,500 Manitobans receiving provincial EIA (Gates, 2017) and 43,455 Manitobans receiving Federal Income Assistance (Beardy, September 26, 2017). A total of approximately 115,000 Manitobans receive support from

either provincial or federal income assistance programs. These programs have been part of Canada's social safety net since the 1960s, but their meagre benefit levels are well below the poverty line leaving people in deep poverty, unable to gain the stability necessary to make the transition into training or employment. Poverty is in large part a result of a lack of income (Sheldrick et al 2006: 4). Instead of delivering programs that leave people trapped in cycles of inter-generational poverty, how can we reform income assistance programs to bring people out of poverty? Based on interviews with service providers and the work of poverty activists and community organizations in Manitoba, the purpose of this paper is to set forth recommendations to reform Canada's and Manitoba's income assistance programs to end poverty. Based on the research, Canada's and Manitoba's poverty reduction strategies should include action in the following areas:

- Set poverty reduction targets and timelines to ensure that there is a framework for action and accountability;
- Implement a comprehensive, coordinated approach to poverty reduction that includes

investments in health care, affordable child care, education and training;

- The Federal Government and Province should immediately increase the basic needs component of the Federal and provincial income assistance budgets to the poverty line and make it available to all people living in low-income;
- The Federal Government and Province should work towards replacing income assistance programs with a basic income to reduce bureaucracy and end the stigmatization of people who receive benefits;
- The Federal Government should develop a coordinated approach in partnership with First Nations and the provinces to close the gap between income support programs on and off reserve and to support decolonization efforts;
- Replace the minimum wage with a living wage that is set to the poverty line;
- Create a new Federal transfer payment to provinces and territories dedicated to improving income security that is tied to poverty reduction targets.

In the first part of the paper I give a brief overview of poverty in Manitoba and how certain groups who face historic barriers to participation in the labour force, such as women, Indigenous people, persons with disabilities, and newcomers are more likely to live in poverty. In the sec-

ond part of the paper I examine Manitoba's Employment and Income Assistance program (EIA) and its Federal counterpart, Income Assistance, which operates on reserve. During the 1990s, reforms were made to these programs to cut benefits and reduce EIA caseloads that were punitive in nature. I argue that these changes resulted in a "welfare wall" that further entrenched people on EIA rather than helping them transition into employment. In the third part of the paper, I examine how the punitive model of welfare reform is still operative. The basic needs component of the EIA budget, which covers food, clothing, and other necessities, has not increased substantially since the early 1990s. The effect of inflation has resulted in significantly reduced purchasing power for people on EIA. In the fourth part of the paper, I look at the federal Income Assistance (IA) program that operates on reserves in Manitoba. Under the federal program, rates and program eligibility are required to match the provinces, but have not kept pace. In addition, migration patterns of First Nations people are resulting in more people transitioning to urban centres for medical treatment, decent housing, education, and economic opportunities. Indigenous people who make this transition are cut off from federal IA. They must reapply into the provincial system and navigate bureaucratic hurdles that sometimes leave them without support. In the final part of the paper I present recommendations based on the research to end poverty by improving Canada's and Manitoba's income support programs.

Poverty in Manitoba

According to the Low-Income Cut Off-After Tax (LICO-AT) measure, there were 105,000 Manitobans (approximately 8.9%) living in poverty in 2011 (*View From Here* 2015: 12). As a percentage, the number of Manitobans living in poverty has gone down since the 1990s when it averaged 15% (12). However, the depth of poverty in Manitoba has not changed and remains, on average, between 25–35% below the poverty line (14). The average length of time that people are in low income ranges between 2.5–2.7 years (Bernas and Mackinnon 2015: 80) although some are in poverty for much longer.

Certain groups are more likely to experience low income than other groups. With the exception of single seniors, women have higher poverty rates than men in all ages and family types (*View from Here* 2015:14). The poverty gap between single women and men under 65 is the widest — 39.1% vs 22.7% (14). Single women under 65 make up the largest share of people living in poverty at 19% (14). Bernas and Mackinnon attribute the gender gap in the prevalence of poverty among single women versus men, to the fact that the employment rate for men is higher than women, and to the fact that women's average weekly earnings are approximately 25% lower than men (Bernas and Mackinnon 2015: 80).

The rate of poverty among female lone-parent families is the highest of all family types at 34.3% (*View From Here* 15). Manitoba's child poverty rate is between 11.3% and 22.4% depending on how it is measured (15). Manitoba has ranked among top three provinces with the highest child poverty rates for the past two decades (15). The rate of poverty for children in lone-parent families is the highest of all family types at 38.6% (15).

Susan Prentice argues that the availability and cost of child care is a significant factor in women's poverty. She writes: "Manitoba's child care fees are second lowest in Canada, but they are still high costing more than a monthly mortgage, and often more than annual university tuition" (Prentice 2013). While Manitoba offers a fee subsidy for very low-income parents, the percentage of families receiving the subsidy has plummeted from 47% of children in 2001/02 to 29% of enrolled children in 2013 (Prentice 2013). Lack of affordable child care creates a barrier to employment for single parents which results in lower labour force participation (Prentice 2009: 5).

The number of Indigenous Manitobans living in poverty is higher than the provincial average at 14.2%. The depth of poverty among Indigenous Manitobans is striking — on average incomes are

50% below the poverty line (*View From Here* 2015: 15). Bernas and Mackinnon attribute the higher rate of poverty among Indigenous Manitobans to a history of damaging colonial policies, continued systemic oppression, differences in earnings and employment, lower high school completion and post-secondary education rates (2015: 81). Statistics show that Indigenous Manitobans must overcome significant barriers to escape poverty. For example, 49% of Indigenous Manitobans living on reserve live in housing that is not suitable (83).

The number of recent immigrants (those arriving within five years) living in poverty is about 31.4% (*View From Here* 2015: 16). Recent immigrants experience poorer labour market outcomes and can face challenges to finding employment due to lack of English or French and the transferability of qualifications. The poverty rates among Manitobans with disabilities is also higher than the provincial average at 12.4%. Manitobans with disabilities have higher unemployment and lower labour force participation (17). Those with severe and prolonged disabilities may be unable to re-enter the labour force and rely on government assistance (Bernas and Mackinnon 2015: 85).

The numbers don't reflect the reality of what it means to live in poverty. There is an increasing body of literature that shows a strong correlation between the social determinants of health (or living conditions) and health outcomes (Raphael 2015: 7). In their book, *Social Determinants of Health: The Canadian Facts*, Julia Mikkonen and Dennis Raphael write: "[t]he primary factors that shape the health of Canadians are not medical treatments or lifestyle choices but rather the living conditions they experience" (7). This body of research shows that inequalities in housing, education, employment and income are strong predictors of health outcomes (Raphael 2015: 10).

The research also indicates that people who live in poverty experience high levels of physiological and psychological stress that arises from coping with poor housing, poor food quality, insecurity, discrimination, and poor working con-

ditions (Raphael 2015: 10). Chronic stress leads to prolonged strain on the body and weakens resistance to diseases (10). People who are experiencing high levels of stress may turn to alcohol and drugs for temporary relief (10).

Income is the most important social determinant of health because it shapes overall living conditions, affects psychological functioning, and influences health-related behaviours such as quality of diet, extent of physical activity, tobacco use, and excessive alcohol use (12). All of this takes a toll on people's self-esteem and their hopes for the future. Research also indicates that the longer one is in poverty, the harder it becomes to break out of the cycle and the more likely that the cycle will be repeated with the next generation (Bernas and Mackinnon 2015: 86).

Living conditions are shaped by policy choices made by governments (Mikkonen and Raphael 2010: 7). Raphael and Bryant note that, according to Statistics Canada, 40,000 people die prematurely each year as a result of income inequality. That's the equivalent of airplane with 110 passengers falling out of the sky every day for a year (Raphael and Bryant 2014). They conclude that "[i]ncome inequality is not only bad for our quality of life and economic productivity, it is directly related to the deaths of Canadians on an almost unimaginable scale."

The cost of poverty is borne by everybody, not just the poor. There are significant costs to government and society, such as increased health care costs, spending on the criminal justice system and lower levels of productivity. One study estimated the cost of poverty for the city of Toronto alone was \$4.4 to \$5.5 billion a year (House of Commons 2017: 7). *The View From Here* notes that the Manitoba government spends \$500 million per year on Justice, an increase of \$200 million since 2006 (20). The number of children in care of Child and Family Services (CFS) has also almost doubled since 2005 (Puxley 2016). A preventative approach that addresses poverty can reduce the costs of crime and family breakdown (*View From Here* 2015: 20).

EIA and IA: A Brief History

EIA and IA are programs of last resort for people who do not have enough money to pay for their basic needs. In total, 115,000 Manitobans rely upon the provincial and federal income assistance programs. As of May 2017, there were 42,400 cases for a total of 71,500 people receiving benefits from Manitoba’s EIA program (Gates, 2017).¹ Of those cases, 8,400 are single parents (25,800 people), 20,800 are people with disabilities (25,400 people), 12,900 are general assistance (20,000 people) and 200 are “other” (390 persons). The vast majority of those cases are either people with a disability or single parents. As of 2017, there are 21,421 households and a total of 43,455 Manitobans receiving benefits through the Federal government’s Income Assistance Program (Beardy, September 26, 2017).

The number of Manitobans receiving EIA benefits has increased by almost 10,000 persons since 2013/14, an increase of over 15%. Over the past year alone, the number of persons receiving EIA has increase by more than 6,000 persons. The number of single parent recipients has increased by 1,500 persons since 2015/16, while the number of single individuals receiving benefits under the General Assistance category has increased by almost 5,000 persons in the past year. This raises the question why these numbers have increased so dramatically over the last three years?

The amount of money people receive on EIA varies depending on whether they are single, have dependents or a disability. For example, a single person with no dependents will receive \$806/month, a person with a disability will re-

TABLE 1 Manitobans Receiving Employment and Income Assistance (EIA) Benefits, May 2017

Category	Cases	Persons
Single Parent	8,400	25,800
Disability	20,800	25,400
General Assistance	12,900	20,000
Other	200	390
Total	42,400	71,500

SOURCE: Gates, 2017

TABLE 2 Average Number of Manitobans Receiving Employment Income Assistance (EIA) Benefits 2013–2016

Category	2013/14		2014/15		2015/16	
	Cases	Persons	Cases	Persons	Cases	Persons
Single Parent	7,899	24,678	7,813	24,358	7,813	24,381
Disability	20,168	24,783	20,435	25,031	20,575	25,159
General Assistance	7,336	12,132	8,390	13,369	9,821	15,192
Other	208	326	215	320	215	326
Total	35,611	61,919	36,853	63,078	38,424	65,058

SOURCE: *Manitoba Jobs and the Economy Annual Report 2015–2016*, page 56

TABLE 3 Total Monthly Incomes for Various Family Types Receiving EIA

Family Scenario	100% of Poverty Line MBM ¹	Total Monthly Income	Total Monthly Income as % of MBM	Monthly Increase Needed to get to 100% of MBM
Single adult	\$1,522	\$806	53%	\$716
Single person with disability	\$1,522	\$1,027	67%	\$495
Single parent, two children ³	\$2,637	\$2,362	90%	\$275
Two parents, two children ⁴	\$3,045	\$2,554	84%	\$491
Part-time worker, minimum wage ⁵	\$1,522	\$1,411	93%	\$111

SOURCE: *Make Poverty History Manitoba*, July 2017

¹Statistics Canada's Market Basket Measure (2015); ²EIA, Rent Assist, federal child benefits, and the GST credit; ³Ages 10/13; ⁴Ages 4/7; ⁵Single worker, minimum wage, 25 hours per week

ceive \$1,027/month, while a single parent with two children will receive a total monthly income of \$2,362. These amounts include Rent Assist, a portable rent supplement that provides 75% of the median market rent and is available to all Manitobans in low-income who qualify. Despite the inclusion of Rent Assist, EIA amounts are all below the poverty line (*Make Poverty History Manitoba 2017*). The amount that single individuals receive is 47% below the poverty line; for people with disabilities it is 33% below the poverty line. As a result of the National Child Benefit, families on EIA with children are better off; however, they are still hundreds of dollars below the poverty line. The Federal Government policy is to set the amount for IA on reserve to match the level of support offered by the province in which the First Nation community is located (INAC 2017: Section 1.2, page 2).

Manitoba's EIA program began in the 1960s as a program of last resort to provide temporary relief for people whose incomes were insufficient to meet their basic needs (EIA Rate Review 2013: 1). During 1990s provincial governments made significant changes to EIA to reduce the number of people accessing benefits. These changes coincided with the Federal Government's decision to abandon the Canada Assistance Plan (CAP), a funding arrangement between the Federal Government and the provinces that provided 50% of program costs for social services. The new arrangement, the Canada Health and Social Transfer (CHST), provided a lump sum to provinces with very few strings attached. With less federal funding and fewer strings attached, the provinces set out to reduce spending on EIA programs by cutting benefits, making eligibility requirements more stringent, and introducing welfare to work

(INAC 2007: 2–3). In recent years provincial reforms of EIA have been geared towards moving from a passive benefit system to the introduction of work expectations for EIA recipients or “Active Measures.” The new model encourages social assistance recipients to seek employment and includes motivation, counselling, education, job training, job search skills, subsidized, employment, and daycare (Hick 2007: 271–274).

EIA reforms of the 1990s and the introduction of “Active Measures” coincided with the rise of neoliberal political ideology and a change in the way poverty was perceived (Li 2011: 7). Neo-liberalism is a political ideology that prescribes smaller government, low taxes and inflation rates, de-regulation, less government debt, open markets and free trade, and an emphasis on individualism and entrepreneurship (Li 2011: 6). Neoliberal ideology has reinforced the belief that welfare dependency is an individual and not a collective problem (Sheldrick 2006: 56). This led to a backlash against the poor based on the myth that people on welfare were “lazy” and chose to receive benefits rather than work. Sheldrick writes: “our welfare system is underpinned by the notion that the poor can be distinguished between those who are deserving and those who are not... which results in assumptions that poverty is an individual not a collective problem and that welfare recipients are lazy and unwilling to work” (55).

The neoliberal belief that welfare recipients are choosing to game the system rather than

work was evidenced most clearly in the creation of a welfare fraud line by Manitoba’s Progressive Conservative government during the mid-1990s (Li 2011: 8). When the NDP were returned to office in Manitoba in 1999, they did away with the welfare fraud line and made minor changes to EIA rates for single individuals and people with disabilities (13). They also ended the claw back of the National Child Benefit for EIA recipients providing additional support to families with children (13). The NDP did not increase basic monthly assistance rates (13). By 2011, the government’s decision to freeze EIA rates and the effect of inflation eroded benefit levels to 65% of what they were 1993 (13). The refusal to increase EIA rates with inflation continued the punitive, neoliberal approach to EIA.

Research shows that EIA recipients would rather work than be on welfare, but are unable to make the transition into employment due to a variety of factors. Sheldrick interviewed 95 people receiving EIA in Winnipeg’s inner-city to gather their perspectives on the EIA system. He found that almost all of the respondents indicated that they did not want to be on welfare and would like to work (64). Interviewees cited their lack of education and training, affordable transportation, child care, and factors related to illness and disability as barriers to finding employment (65). Sheldrick’s finding lends support to the view that EIA dependency is not an individual problem, but the result of a variety of factors that require a collective response.

The Welfare Wall

Research shows that the design of the EIA system itself creates a barrier to people leaving EIA for employment. This concept is called the welfare wall:

The welfare wall refers to the obstacles that welfare recipients face when they enter or re-enter the labour market. The wall arises from the impact of direct and indirect taxes that welfare households face when they supplement their benefits with earned income. Another tier of the welfare wall is the potential loss of ‘income-in-kind’ such as supplementary health and dental benefits (Caledon Institute 1993: 1).

EIA recipients who re-enter the labour market pay back to government most of their employment earnings through the claw back of their benefits, income, payroll taxes, and lost refundable credits (2). According to Section 8(4) of the Manitoba Assistance Regulation, a recipient can earn up to \$200/month before their earnings are clawed back at a rate of 70%. In addition, once a recipient’s earnings reach 135% of their benefit income, they are ineligible for further EIA assistance (Government of Manitoba 2015: 11). The claw back of earned income creates a disincentive for people to leave assistance

for employment and reinforces the welfare wall. In Budget 2015, the Government of Manitoba committed to eliminating the 135% rule, but it remains in effect (11).

EIA also provides benefits for people based on family size and individual need (such as special diet, dental, and optical support) that may not be available through their employer (*EIA Rate Review* 2013: 1). As we’ve seen, affordable child care can also be a significant barrier for lone-parent families. The result of the welfare wall is that EIA recipients may see only a marginal increase in their disposable income and the loss of costly benefits by leaving EIA for employment.

The Caledon Institute and other academics argue that income support benefits should be moved outside the traditional welfare system to support to all people in low-income, not just those who are eligible to receive EIA (Caledon Institute 1993: 1). This would address the disincentive to leave welfare for work and be fairer to people in low-wage jobs (*EIA Rate Review* 13). During the mid-2000s the Manitoba Government began implementing reforms that allowed people to keep EIA benefits while transitioning into employment through the “Rewarding

Work” strategy which was introduced in 2007 (2). In 2015, the NDP government introduced Rent Assist which increased the shelter benefit for people on EIA who are in rental housing to 75% of the median market rent. Rent Assist was

also made available to people who are not receiving EIA benefits, but who are low-income. There are currently 7,000 Manitobans receiving Rent Assist who are not receiving EIA benefits (Gates).

Inadequacy of the Basic Needs Component of the EIA Budget

After the punitive reforms of the 1990s and years of frozen or reduced EIA benefits, the introduction of Rent Assist was an important policy change that had an immediate, positive impact on the lives of thousands of Manitobans living in low-income.² While the introduction of Rent Assist and increasing the shelter benefit were positive changes, the basic needs budget that people rely on for necessities, such as food, clothing, personal and household items, has not increased since the early 90s.³ Currently, the basic needs component of the EIA budget range from \$195.00/month for a single individual, to \$274.80/month for a person with a disability, to \$376.40/month for a single parent family with a 4-year-old child (*Assistance Regulation, Manitoba Assistance Act*).

Make Poverty History Manitoba (MPHM) estimates that the basic needs budget provides only 40 to 60% of what it actually costs to eat healthy food. For example, MPHM estimates the cost of food for a single individual at \$295.70/month, well above the \$195.00/month that EIA allocates from food, clothing, transportation costs and other necessities (*Double The EIA Basic Needs Budget* August 10, 2017). For a single parent with one child, the basic needs budget leaves less than \$3.00/month to purchase all other necessities af-

ter the actual cost of food is subtracted. MPHM is calling on the government to immediately increase the basic needs budget for all categories of EIA recipients and to implement a transparent process with community participation to ensure the budget reflects the actual cost of basic necessities (July 2017). Food Banks Canada identifies inadequate social assistance rates as one of the driving forces behind food bank usage (14). Over 60,000 people accessed food banks in Manitoba in 2016, an increase of 53% since 2008 (18). Food Banks Canada recommends scrapping the social assistance system in favour of a basic income that “has a logical relationship to the level of earnings offered through work” (14).

The Manitoba Ombudsman’s Office has also made recommendations to increase support for basic needs and introduce a more transparent process for setting EIA rates. In its 2010 investigation of the EIA program, the Ombudsman’s Office found no formalized, transparent and accountable process by which the Department reviews assistance rates on an annual basis (68). The report recommends the Department institute a “formal documented process for reviewing and making recommendations for periodically updating basic and shelter rates...in a logical and

equitable manner” (71). The report also recommends that this process be documented and made available to the public (71). The Department agreed to implement a formal process for reviewing and updating basic and shelter rates, but said that a recommendation to make the process public was “under review” (71).

The report also criticized the department’s policy of not including the cost of telephone and transportation as basic necessities in the calculation of the basic needs budget (77). The Province does provide funding for telephone and transportation unless there is a medical or job related need (Gates). The report found that there was “...a significant need for participants to communicate with the program and, generally, a need for program participants to remain in involved with their community and avoid the impacts of the physical and social isolation that can arise from poverty” (78). In addition, the report pointed out the importance of having a telephone for single parent participants to keep up communication with school, community supports, and for emergency purposes (78). EIA covers the cost of transportation related to employment, medical reasons or for other special needs - for example, if a parent is going to school or work; however, transportation costs are not covered as a basic necessity or for participants who are looking for employment (80). The report recommended that the department “review the definition of basic necessities to ensure that

support is provided for the communication and transportation needs of participants...” (84). The 2010 recommendation is “under review” by the Department (85).

In 2013 the Province undertook a review of EIA rates that compared EIA rates with benchmarks of low income. The review showed that, particularly for single individuals, EIA rates were below low-income thresholds (EIA Rate Review 12). The community-based poverty reduction strategy, *The View from Here 2015: Manitobans call for a Renewed Poverty Reduction Strategy*, makes various recommendations to improve EIA, including: the creation of an EIA Rate Review Committee consisting of representatives from government and the community to complete the task of implementing the Ombudsman’s recommendations; establishing a transparent mechanism to define basic needs and for setting and reviewing EIA rates on an annual basis to ensure they keep up with the cost of living; increasing EIA rates in all categories to the actual of goods within two years, then reviewing them annually to ensure they do not fall behind the cost of living (*View from Here 2015*: 33–34). The strategy also recommends that creation of a pension-like disability program for Manitobans with “severe and prolonged disabilities” (34). Make Poverty History Manitoba is calling for a new portable basic needs benefit that would be equal to the poverty line and available to all Manitobans both on and off EIA (MPHM July 2017).

The Gap between Federal and Provincial Income Assistance Programs

Under section 91(24) of the Constitution Act, the Federal Government is responsible for the provision of services for people on reserve. It is the policy of Indigenous and Northern Affairs Canada (INAC) to provide residents on reserve with social and income assistance services that follow provincial rates and eligibility criteria (INAC 2017: 2). INAC provides funding to over 500 First Nations across the country who administer the IA program (INAC 2007: 4). The program has four funding components: basic needs, special needs, pre-employment supports, and service delivery funding. Basic needs covers assistance for food, shelter, and clothing; special needs covers goods that are essential to a person's physical and social well-being, but which are not included in basic needs funding; pre-employment supports include counselling, life skills training; and service delivery funding pays for first nations and tribal councils administrative costs (INAC 2007: 4–5).

As of 2016–2017 there were 21,421 households (a total of 43,455 beneficiaries) receiving support through the IA program in Manitoba (Beardy, September 26, 2017). The IA dependency rate in Manitoba is 46.9%, a decline from 54.2% in 2013–2014. Canada-wide, the IA dependency rate was 33.6% in 2012–13 (INAC “Key Facts” November 2014). There is variation within regions in terms of the number of people on First Nations who rely on IA. In some communities near urban centres dependency rates are close to the Canadian average; in other more remote or isolated communities where economic development is more challenging dependency rates are higher (INAC 2007: 18). The high rate of IA dependency among First Nations in Manitobans explains, at least in part, why Manitoba also has the highest Indigenous child poverty rate in the country both on reserve (76%) and off reserve (39%) (*Shameful Neglect* 15).

TABLE 4 Manitobans Living on Reserve Receiving Income Assistance Benefits

	Single Individuals		Single with Children		All Family Units		Total On-Reserve Population	IA Dependency Rate
	# of household	# of beneficiaries	# of household	# of beneficiaries	# of household	# of beneficiaries		
2013-2014	15257	15257	5928	18420	24563	48594	89683	54.2%
2014-2015	15262	15262	5942	18370	24402	47829	91175	52.5%
2015-2016	12017	12017	5567	17435	20882	43178	90868	47.5%
2016-2017	12713	12713	5546	17303	21421	43455	92644	46.9%

SOURCE: Sherry Beardy, September 26, 2017

NOTES: Total on-reserve population is the sum of INAC's Registered Indian population and Statistics Canada's Non-registered on-reserve population; The IA Dependency rate is calculated using the Total IA Beneficiaries divided by the Total on-reserve population.

IA Funding Gap

I sat down with Manitoba's Social Development Advisory Technical Group (SDATG) to learn more about how the Federal Government's Income Assistance program operates in Manitoba. The SDATG is made up of social development advisors from the seven Manitoba tribal councils, independent First Nations, and First Nations political organizations (INAC 2017: 2). The SDATG was mandated by the Assembly of Manitoba Chiefs to work with INAC to identify and address issues to improve social development programs on reserve. Social development advisors also provide support to First Nations in administering the Income Assistance program by providing policy advice; training for IA workers; and mediating between applicants and First Nations.

The IA program is administered largely by First Nations through government-to-government agreements with INAC. First Nations receive funding from INAC to hire staff to administer the program in their communities. Social development advisors raised concerns about inadequate funding to administer the program. INAC's own internal audit evaluation of the IA program found that Manitoba had the lowest cost per case service delivery expenditure among regions (INAC 2007: 19). As a result, INAC reviewed their ser-

vice delivery funding and increased budgetary support for social service administrators (INAC 2007: 37).

Despite the increase in 2007, social development advisors raised concerns about extremely high caseloads for Income Assistance workers on reserve. SDATG estimates that in some communities' workers have caseloads in excess of 500 households (SDATG June 14, 2017). In addition, workers are paid lower wages than their provincial counterparts, work with outdated technology, and have limited professional development opportunities. Many workers would like to have more time to work with clients to help them get into training or employment, but are too overwhelmed with their caseloads (SDATG June 14, 2017).

INAC also imposes significant reporting requirements on First Nations that are time consuming. If mistakes are made resulting in overpayments or payments to people who are found to be ineligible to receive IA, INAC will withdraw funding from other programs in the First Nation to cover the loss (SDATG June 14, 2017). SDATG estimates that INAC claws back \$5 to \$10 million/year from First Nations in Manitoba through the compliance review process (SDATG 2015: "Com-

pliance Reviews”). SDATG considers this process to be punitive towards First Nations rather than supportive. They are calling on the Federal Government to provide funding for service delivery that is based on caseload and comparable to provincial funding for administration of EIA. They are also calling on the Federal Government to fund First Nations government owned IA software program (SDATG 2015: “Service Delivery”).

Some First Nations have negotiated self-government agreements with the Federal Government that gives them greater autonomy. For example, Sioux Valley Dakota Nation recently completed a self-government agreement which gives them law-making powers in more than 50 areas, including cultural matters, elections, financial administration, management of lands, housing, education, health, social development, and public safety (INAC March 2014). Social Development Advisors from the Sioux Valley Dakota Nation Tribal Council said that self-government has improved the administration of their IA program (SDATG June 14, 2017).

The Federal Government’s IA rates are based upon provincial rates. As we’ve seen, the basic needs component of the EIA budget is insufficient to provide for a healthy diet and other necessities. Many First Nations in Manitoba are remote rural and northern communities where the cost of goods is significantly greater. Like the provincial EIA program, IA provides funding for telephone and transportation costs are provided as “special needs” only in exceptional circumstances — a medical reason or to attend the funeral of a family member (INAC 2017: Section 4.6, pages 2–3). Many First Nations are remote communities where the potential for isolation is greater than in the urban centres and where there is no public transportation available. This poses an even bigger challenge to people who may need to commute to neighbouring communities to find employment.

Another concern raised by the SDATG is inadequate funding for special needs under Income

Assistance. Special needs are essential goods and services that are not provided for through the basic amount (INAC 2017: Section 4.6, page 1). Allowable special needs costs could include essential household furnishings — for example, a crib for a newborn, repairs to a household appliance, travel costs to visit a loved one who is in hospital, emergency food and clothing in case a fire destroys a recipient’s home. In its funding to First Nations, the Federal Government caps special needs funding at 3% of the basic needs budget. It considers special needs funding as a “controllable item” (INAC 2017: Section 4.6, page 1). These funds must also cover the Non-Insured Health Benefits (NIHB) program, which funds health benefits and dental needs not covered by provincial health plans, such as drugs, medical transportation, dental, vision, crisis intervention counselling, etc (INAC 2017: Section 4.7 page 1).

In its policy and procedures manual, The Federal Government advises IA administrators not to spend funds for NIHB on special needs items “until it is clear that they are not needed for health benefits” (INAC 2017: Section 4.6, page 1). Administrators are encouraged to keep track of expenditures on NIHB to justify requests for additional funding from INAC to meet the needs of eligible special needs funding recipients (INAC 2017: Section 4.6, page 1). According to this policy, First Nations must keep special needs expenditures to 2.4% of their budget until later in the fiscal year when they know how much expenditures for NIHB will be (INAC 2017: Section 4.6, page 1). The implication of this policy is that First Nations may be forced to delay or deny funding to recipients for essential items to ensure that there are sufficient funds to cover NIHB.

In February 2017, INAC introduced a new policy that places a further cap on specific items paid for through the special needs budget (Dorion, September 12, 2017). These changes were not approved by SDATG and First Nations political leaders (Dorion, September 12, 2017). The

new policy caps funding for specific household items. For example, INAC will approve \$300 for a fridge once every 7 years and \$275 for a stove or washer once every 10 years. SDATG points out that these amounts do not take into account the full cost of shipping to Northern communi-

ties. People in remote communities often do not have access to food banks, second hand stores, and charitable organizations (Dorion, September 12, 2017). SDATG is calling on INAC to eliminate caps on the special needs budget (Dorion, September 12, 2017).

The Shelter Benefit

Throughout the 1990s the Federal Government cut the IA budget, then capped it at 2% in 1997 (INAC 2007: 3). At the same time, the Canadian Mortgage and Housing Corporation (CMHC) partnered with First Nations to build rental housing on reserves. People who rent housing on reserve are eligible to receive a shelter benefit under Income Assistance. However, the Federal Government's IA budget has not kept pace with the construction of new rental housing and increased demand for the shelter benefit. An internal audit of INAC estimates that in 2005 there was a shortfall of \$62 million in new funds to apply the shelter benefit consistently (INAC 2007: 18). The audit notes that much of the rental housing is located on the prairies (18).

Recently, the Government of Manitoba introduced Rent Assist, a program that increased

the shelter benefits for people both on and off EIA to 75% of the median market rent. I asked an official from Manitoba's INAC regional office whether the Federal Government would be matching Manitoba's Rent Assist program. I was informed that INAC provides a shelter allowance matched to amount the province provides for people in social housing. The IA shelter benefit is available if there is a community-wide rental regime or during the duration of a loan for housing constructed on reserve through the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation (CMHC) (Beardy September 26, 2017). Manitoba's Rent Assist program is not applicable to the IA program because there is no private rental market on First Nations (Beardy September 7, 2017).

The Service Gap

People living on reserve are increasingly moving to urban centres to seek employment, education, training, and other opportunities. Often key health care services are only available in urban centres. In their report, *Moving to the City: Housing and Aboriginal Migration to Winnipeg*, Josh Brandon and Evelyn Peters examine some of the challenges that Indigenous people face in finding housing when they move from the reserve to the city. Brandon and Peters point out that the Indigenous population living in cities has grown dramatically over the last 50 years. In 2006, approximately 50% of indigenous people lived in cities (5). Migration from the reserve is not a one-time, one-directional process; it often involves moving back and forth between reserve and city (38). Indigenous people who move to the city must adapt to a new culture and way of life that is dramatically different. They also face a discontinuity of services as they transition from federally funded services on reserve to provincially funded services off reserve. This gap in services poses a significant hardship on Indigenous people.

When people leave the reserve they are cut-off of IA and must apply for EIA. Only under exceptional circumstances will the Federal Government

provide any support to people who are moving off reserve into the city to cover the cost of moving and setting up in a new community (INAC 2017: Section 4.6, page 4). This is an example of an inequity that exists between IA and EIA. Under EIA, people who move from one community to another can recover moving costs; however, under IA, support for relocation is provided only under exceptional circumstances. Once a person leaves the reserve, their IA benefits are cut off and they must apply for EIA.

The Assembly of Manitoba Chiefs offers services to people who are moving from the reserve to the city through the Eagle Urban Transition Centre (EUTC). I met with Kevin Fontaine, Program Manager of the Patient Advocate Unit, and Patient Navigators Valerie Olson and Rosalie Ouskan, to discuss some of the challenges that people face in making the transition from the reserve to the city. They estimate that over 90% of their clients receive Income Assistance from the Federal Government (Interview May 24, 2017). The Patient Navigators have caseloads of approximately 70 people at a time and the Program Manager has a caseload of about 30 people. Many of EUTC clients have low education and literacy and struggle to navigate the provincial

EIA bureaucracy. Staff report that without these patient advocacy services many of their clients would be unable to access provincial benefits and most likely left destitute in the city.

Clients of the Patient Advocate Unit are often referrals through the Winnipeg Regional Health Authority (WRHA) who are in Winnipeg for long-term health treatments. These “In transit patients” can receive meals and accommodation through the First Nations Inuit Health Branch for up to three months under the NIHB program (INAC 2007: 11). If their treatment lasts longer, they must apply for provincial EIA. The Unit helps patients find housing and apply into the EIA program.

People moving from reserve face many challenges in applying for EIA. For example, EIA requires that people have valid identification, such as a birth certificate, social insurance card, driver’s license, passport or Treaty Card. It can take several weeks or months to acquire the necessary identification for people to successfully apply for EIA. Application for one piece of identification is often contingent on another piece. Brandon and Peters point out that it can take considerable time to build an identification history (20). They also note that to successfully enroll in EIA taxes have to be up to date, but many people in low-income have not done their taxes in years, if ever (20).

The province appears to be sensitive to the challenge of acquiring identification. Provincial officials say they will accept a letter provided by a “responsible community member familiar with the person applying for assistance describing and vouching for the person’s identify is acceptable pending receipt of a formal identification document” (Gates). The province will also assist applicants with acquiring acceptable identification by covering the costs associated with acquiring the identification and by assisting with the application process itself (Gates). EIA may also provide emergency benefits pending receipt of the required documents.

People who are in the city undergoing treatment often face difficulty getting to EIA intake meetings. If people are unable to make it to an intake meeting or late, it can take weeks to get another meeting with EIA staff (Interview May 24, 2017). During that time, people are left stranded in the city with no supports. The Patient Advocate Unit shared that some people who are sent to Winnipeg for medical treatment become so frustrated and demoralized by the barriers they face that they decide to end their treatment prematurely and return to their home communities to die.

The Patient Advocate Unit staff have some good working relationships with provincial EIA workers, but find that there is an overall lack of cultural understanding and sensitivity towards First Nations people and the unique challenges they face (Interview May 24, 2017). The province offers some cultural sensitivity training to staff on the history of Indigenous people and workshops on building strong relationships (Gates). Patient Advocate Unit staff said that they have no working relationship with INAC (Interview May 24, 2017).

Neither INAC or the province track the number of people moving from Federal Income Assistance to provincial EIA. Given the number of people migrating to urban areas from reserve, it is likely that a significant number of people are making this transition. This information would be helpful in determining how many people are making this transition and support efforts to make the transition more seamless for First Nations people who are moving between federal and provincial income support programs.

Calls for an increase to IA benefits are growing. A House of Commons Standing Committee on poverty reduction recommends that INAC “review social assistance rates for First Nations peoples on reserve in light of higher costs of living and limited employment opportunities so that recipients are ensured an adequate income” (Standing Committee Report 2017: 113).

The Federal Government should increase funding for administration of the program and eliminate the caps on funding for special needs. A coordinated approach to income support programs between INAC, First Nations, and the Province is needed to address the service gap for people moving from reserves to the city. A first step is to begin collecting data on how many people are making this transition and improve information sharing between IA and EIA to allow for a more

seamless transition. Social development advisors expressed a desire to replace IA with a Basic Income (BI) or Guaranteed Annual Income (GAI) program. A Basic Income program would allow people to retain their benefits once they leave the reserve. It would also reduce the bureaucratic hurdles people must overcome when applying for income support and free up more time for income support workers to help people find training and employment.

Going Forward: Income Security to End Poverty

A Poverty Reduction Strategy that Sets Targets and Timelines

Canada and Manitoba are at work on poverty reduction strategies. These strategies must include targets and timelines for actions that will be taken to reduce poverty. Targets and timelines create a framework for the development of a focused strategy and ensure accountability and transparency in implementing the strategy (*View from Here* 2015: 24).

Comprehensive and Coordinated Approach

Poverty is a complex and multifaceted problem. Certain groups who have historically faced social exclusion and discrimination are more at risk of living in poverty. *The View from Here* recommends a comprehensive and coordinated approach is necessary to eradicate poverty (*View from Here* 2015: 22). This will require investments in affordable child care, education, health care, social housing and other services that families rely upon.

Increase the Basic Needs Budget and Make it Portable

The Federal Government and Province should replace the basic needs component of the EIA/

IA budget with a portable benefit that is indexed to the poverty line (MPHM July 2017).

Move to a Basic Income

There is growing interest in the idea of introducing a Basic Income (BI) or Guaranteed Annual Income (GAI) in place of Canada's patchwork of income support payments and social assistance programs. Basic Income is a direct transfer from government to individuals or families it ensures a minimum level of income with "no strings attached" (MacDonald 2016: 5). There are many benefits to a BI: it would be less bureaucratic than the social service systems currently in place and allow EIA/IA workers more time to help recipients get into training or find employment (MacDonald estimates that close to 10% of the amounts distributed through income assistance go to administration (6)); it would be easier to navigate for income assistance recipients and remove the stigma of welfare providing dignity to participants (5-9); it would be available to people who are working in low-wage jobs. However, a BI is not a panacea and should not be viewed as replacing other social services, such as education, health care, child care, and other supports.

A Living Wage

As we've seen, many people working in low-wage jobs live in poverty. A poverty reduction strategy must include a living wage policy that ties wages to the cost of living in a given community. For example, in Winnipeg, a living wage in 2016/17 is \$14.54/hour (Fernandez 2017). Without a living wage, portable benefits like Rent Assist, which are available to low-income workers, end up subsidizing companies who choose to pay poverty wages.

Improving Basic Income Benefits For People With Disabilities

Most long-term recipients of EIA are in the system because of a disability (Li 2011: 2–3). Improving the basic needs budget and moving to a Basic Income would provide adequate benefits for people with disabilities as well. Another option is a pension-like basic income support program for Manitobans with severe and prolonged disabilities (*View From Here* 4). Changes to these benefit programs should be designed with meaningful involvement with people with disabilities and the disability community.

Respect for Indigenous Self-Government and Engaging in Decolonization

A poverty reduction strategy must support decolonization efforts to repair the damage that Indigenous people have suffered as a result of colonialism. Self-government agreements, such as the one negotiated by Sioux Valley Dakota Nation, allow Indigenous people to get out from under the Indian Act and to have greater control over their own affairs. It took 20 years for Sioux Valley Dakota Nation to negotiate a self-government agreement. Additional support to assist First Nations with negotiating self-governance agreements and other decolonization efforts should be included in the strategy. Support should also be provided to organizations like the Eagle Urban Transition Centre that are

helping Indigenous people transition from reserves to the city.

Close the Gap Between Federal and Provincial Income Assistance Programs

The Federal Government must take action to address funding inequities between IA and EIA. This includes:

- putting an end to the 3-month cap on Income Assistance for people receiving medical treatment off reserve;
- putting an end to the 3% cap on special needs funding and the cap on funding for household items;
- providing funding to support people moving off reserves as they transition to provincial EIA;
- increasing funding to First Nations for staff, training and technology to administer the Income Assistance program;

The Federal Government should work with First Nations leadership and the provinces to address the gap in service between IA and EIA. This includes:

- a coordinated approach to income assistance for people who are living on and off-reserve
- track the number of people leaving IA for EIA;
- improving information sharing between IA and EIA to make the transition between systems more seamless for First Nations people moving to the city;
- providing support for organizations like AMC's Eagle Urban Transition Centre and Patient Advocate Unit.

The Federal Government should immediately index the basic needs component of the IA budget to the poverty line.

Over the long term, the Federal Government should work with First Nations leadership, and

the provinces to develop a basic income model that is indexed to the poverty line. This would create a seamless program between communities on and off-reserve and allow First Nations to redirect funding for administration to helping people get into training and employment.

New Federal Transfer Payment Tied to Poverty Reduction

By abolishing the Canada Assistance Program (CAP) the Federal Government set in motion the punitive welfare reforms of the 1990s. CAP ensured that all Canadians, regardless of where they lived, would have a minimum level of income assistance. The Federal Government must

take a leadership role once again to ensure that all Canadians have access to a basic level of income assistance. This can be accomplished by providing increased transfers to the provinces and territories that are tied to poverty reduction targets. *The Alternative Federal Budget 2017*, is calling on the Federal Government to introduce a \$4 billion/year transfer dedicated to improving social assistance and disability benefit rates and eligibility among provinces and territories (122). In the first year, the transfer would have no strings attached, but in subsequent years provinces would be required to increase income assistance benefits and show progress on poverty indicators to receive the transfer (122).

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Endnotes

¹ A “case” refers to the applicant, his or her spouse, if applicable, and dependent children under the age of 18.

² In an effort to cut costs, Manitoba’s new Progressive Conservative government recently introduced changes that will claw back Rent Assist benefits for people outside of the EIA system. Not only does this take away desperately needed support from hundreds of Manitoba families, it

will also create a disincentive for people to leave EIA for employment which may cost the government more in the long run (Make Poverty History Manitoba, June 6, 2017).

³ In 2004, the Province increased the basic needs budget by \$20/month per adult for non-disabled single adults and couples without children and for all adults in the disability and aged categories (Gates).



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